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FACTORS WHICH HAVE TO DO WITH THE DECLINE OF THE COUNTRY CHURCH

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North Anson, Maine

The influence of the country church in the five sections of the United States included in this study is most restricted where church management is most efficient and educational advancement is greatest; but in all these sections the better-educated classes, the men active in public affairs and engaged in organized social activity of any sort, are generally active in the church. The principal losses are among those whose educational equipment is limited and whose social instincts are poorly developed. The chief cause of the decline of the church's influence is to be found in the breaking down of the old appeal to the fears of men, based on the commonly accepted belief in a future hell and in the church as dispenser of a magical means of salvation, and in the failure of the new appeal to compel the attention and to command the allegiance of men whose viewpoint is essentially individualistic. This, in brief, is the theme of this paper.

The investigations upon which these conclusions are based have been made by the writer, during the last five years, in Missouri, in Tennessee, in Kansas, in New York, and in Maine. Part of the time he was working as field investigator for the Department of Church and Country Life of the Presbyterian Church, and part of the time he was working independently.

The method used was a combination of that of the general social survey worked out by Dr. Warren H. Wilson with an intensive study much like the "Gill Method," though worked out independently, in the summer of 1911, before the appearance of Gill and Pinchot's *Country Church*. As in the Gill method, *church attendance* was made the chief measure of interest in the church, and the data on church attendance, as well as on school training, financial standing, social activities, and other pertinent questions,

were obtained by submitting the names of the residents of the community to a few well-informed men and accepting their classification. In all about 12,000 persons are embraced in this study. These are distributed as follows:

Gibson County, Tennessee.—An agricultural section in western Tennessee. The value of land averages \$60.00 per acre. Cotton, tomatoes, strawberries, and live stock are the chief sources of income. The population is chiefly of English and Scotch-Irish descent, but there is a negro population of 28 per cent. The basis is 455 heads of white families in 21 different school districts. The conditions found here are probably typical of western Tennessee.

Sullivan County, Missouri.—An agricultural section in northern Missouri. The value of land is \$50.00 an acre. Live stock, wheat, and corn are the chief sources of income. The population is mostly of English and Scotch-Irish descent, through southern channels. The basis here is 451 heads of families in 20 different school districts.

Salt River Presbytery, Missouri.—Six communities were studied here: Mt. Olivet, 116 families; Brush Creek, 81 families; Grassy Creek, 75 families; Buffalo, 55 families; Unity, 45 families; and Smyrna, 96 families. All are agricultural communities in northeastern Missouri. The value of land averages \$65.00 an acre. Live stock, wheat, and corn are the chief sources of income. The population is chiefly of English and Scotch-Irish ancestry, with southern influence predominating. The conditions found here and in Sullivan County are typical of northeastern Missouri.

Northeastern Kansas.—Six communities were studied: Wabaunsee, 101 families; Maple Hill, 150 families; Dover, 140 families; Louisville, 175 families; Barrett, 75 families; Norway, 150 families. All are agricultural communities. The value of land averages \$75.00 an acre. Live stock, wheat, alfalfa, and corn are the chief sources of income. The population is of English, Scotch-Irish, German, and Scandinavian descent, with northern influence predominating. These six communities were selected because of the existence in them of a definite religious movement for social betterment. In the main they are typical of northeastern Kansas.

Westchester County, New York.—Two communities were surveyed: North Salem, 117 families; Bedford, 131 families. Both are agricultural and residential communities. The value of land is from \$50.00 to \$500.00 per acre. The chief sources of income are summer residents and dairying. The population is of English, Irish, and Italian descent. North Salem has 35 farmers, 62 laborers, 13 mechanics, 8 middlemen, and 14 summer residents. Bedford includes 20 summer residents, 8 farmers, 15 mechanics, 35 laborers, 22 single women, and a miscellaneous list of 20. The servants of the wealthy families are not included. These two communities are suburban country communities and are probably not typical of a large section.

Western Maine.—Four communities were surveyed: Newport, 339 voters; North Anson, 217 families; New Vineyard, 96 families; Stratton, Eustis, and Flagstaff (the Dead River communities), 146 families. The value of farm land is \$10.00 to \$30.00 per acre. The population of all these communities is of old New England stock with scarcely any foreign element. Sources of income are, for Dead River: lumbering, guiding, manufacturing, and farming; for Newport: manufacturing and farming; for New Vineyard: farming, lumbering, and manufacturing; for North Anson: farming, lumbering, and manufacturing. These communities were selected as typical of small communities in western Maine.

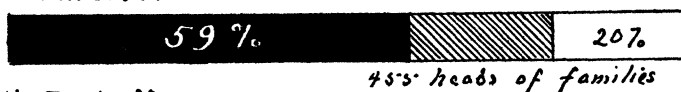
The interest shown in the church in these different sections of country is indicated in Fig. 1. Church attendance is here used as the measure, and three classes of people are distinguished with reference to their interest in the church, viz., those attending more than half the Sundays on which preaching services are held, those attending between 10 and 50 per cent of the Sundays, and those attending less than 10 per cent of the Sundays, or practically none. In each case where whole families are studied only those members over fifteen years of age are considered. The figures here presented show certain striking differences between these different regions as regards interest in the church, the proportion of non-churchgoers varying from 20 per cent in Tennessee and 28 per cent in Missouri to 45 per cent in Kansas, 53 per cent in Westchester County, New York, and 65 per cent in Maine.

Before undertaking to measure the factors which might account for these differences in church attendance, it should be noted that of these five regions one is southern and another is southern in its traditions and institutions. In the other three, New England influence and traditions are predominant. If, therefore, there is between the northern and southern sections a striking contrast in the matter of church attendance, we need not be surprised. We know that the southerner is traditionally a religious standpatter, and that the New Englander has behind him a tradition of dissent and a critical and practical spirit. In the traditions and mental attitude of the communities examined there may be, therefore, important factors which will help to explain the attitude toward the church. It is not within the scope of this paper, however, to go into the history of the communities or into the subtler problems

of folk psychology, but rather to study the communities in cross-section and to show the outstanding characteristics now present which will help to explain the differences between them as regards interest shown in the church. These characteristics can be shown

CHURCH ATTENDANCE in different Regions of the U.S.

West Tennessee



455 heads of families

North East Missouri



1600 persons.

North East Kansas.



6 communities

West Chester Co. N.Y.



2 communities

Maine



4 communities

 attending church more than 50% of the Sundays.
  attending Church from 10 to 50% of the Sundays.


 non-church-goers.

FIG. 1.—Church attendance in different regions of the United States

in part by statistical measurement and in part only by general description.

One characteristic which the two southern sections share in striking contrast to the northern sections is the system of church management. Thus the white people of Gibson County, Tennessee,

had 85 country churches, only 2 of which had a resident minister, and only 1 of which had preaching more than once a month. Of the 46 town and village churches, 26 had resident ministers, and only 10 had preaching full time. In Missouri the same system prevailed. In the 12 communities studied in Kansas, New York, and Maine, only 2 of these including villages of more than 300, there were 14 resident ministers, 25 churches, and preaching every Sunday in each of the 25 churches. From this fact it follows that it is impossible to compare the church attendance in Missouri and Tennessee with that in Kansas, New York, and Maine, except in one particular, viz., the proportion of people in the northern and in the southern sections who have no interest in the church and attend, if they attend at all, only on special occasions. It should also be pointed out that it is a striking and significant fact that the church attendance should be most general in the two sections in which the system of church management is least efficient.

The difference in the educational advancement of the different regions can be, to a certain extent, measured by the difference in the school training of the people. Table I shows the number of people

TABLE I
SCHOOL TRAINING OF PERSONS MORE THAN SIXTEEN YEARS OLD

REGION	COLLEGE OR NORMAL SCHOOL		HIGH SCHOOL OR BUSINESS COLLEGE		NOT MORE THAN COMMON SCHOOL	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Gibson County, Tenn.	10	2.2	18	4.2	427	94.6
Missouri.	37	3.3	74	6.6	996	90.1
Kansas.	89	6.7	135	10.0	1,325	83.3
Westchester County, N.Y.*	60	10.7	105	18.8	394	70.5
Maine.	35	4.4	118	15.0	633	80.6

* Includes summer residents, and does not include Catholic element.

in each region who have had college or normal-school training, high-school or business-college training, and the number who have not gone beyond the common school. This shows that in the Tennessee and Missouri districts, where the interest in the church was general, the percentage of people with more than common-school training was relatively low, while in Kansas, New York, and

Maine, where interest in the church was restricted, the percentage of people with more than common-school training was relatively high. It should be clearly understood, of course, that school training does not tell the whole story of educational advancement. Other factors, such as the character of the schools at which the training is received, the character of the instruction received through the churches, the points of contact with the great currents of thought through periodicals, travel, lectures, libraries, etc., are

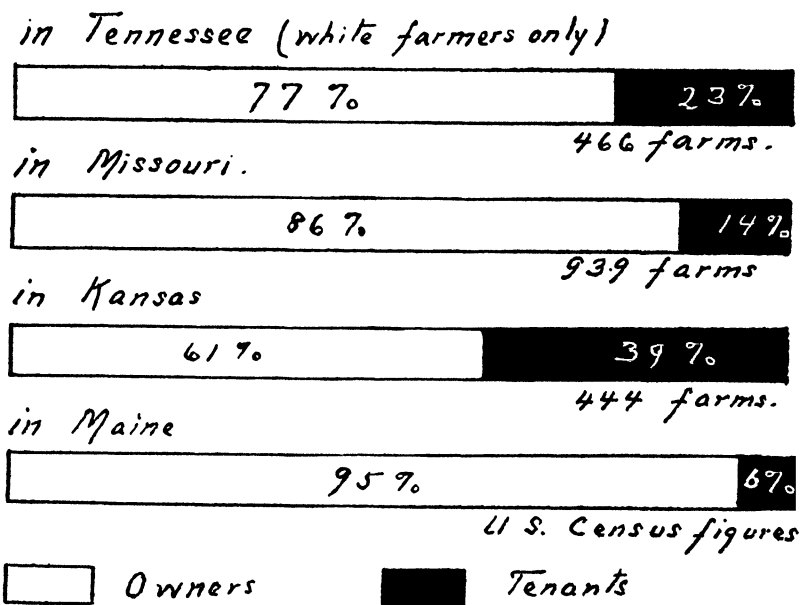


FIG. 2.—Farms operated by tenants

all important, and in these particulars the communities studied in Kansas, New York, and Maine were all more fortunate than those studied in Missouri and Tennessee.

The increase in tenancy is commonly given as one of the chief causes of the decline in the interest in the church among country people. The proportion of tenants in four different regions is shown in Fig. 2. According to these figures, the importance of tenancy, except as a local factor, would appear to be overemphasized. It is true that the proportion of tenancy is higher in Kansas

than in Missouri or among white farmers in Tennessee, but in Maine, where the proportion of tenancy is lowest, the interest in the church among the farmers is also most restricted. In four Maine communities studied, 73 per cent of the farmers did not attend church.

The difference in farming conditions is also of some importance. The fact that the Maine farmer finds farm labor scarce at even \$2.00 a day, that he has only a short growing season for the farm crops, that he has dairy cattle to care for the year round and logging to do in the winter-time, may partly explain his poor attendance at church, as compared with that of the Tennessee farmer, who has plenty of farm labor at \$1.00 a day or even less, a long growing season, and little live stock to care for. More progressive and energetic methods of farming, with a better distribution of crops throughout the year, may partially explain the poor church attendance of the Kansas farmer as compared with that of the Missouri farmer.

Another factor is the facilities for social intercourse outside of the church. The Maine communities here considered were supplied with many social organizations. The Odd Fellows and the Rebeccas, the Masons and the Eastern Star, the Knights of Pythias and the Pythian Sisters, and the Grange were all flourishing. Moving-picture shows and dancing were also much in evidence. In the Tennessee, Missouri, and Kansas communities studied, such lodges as the Modern Woodmen, in which insurance is the prime consideration, were the best developed; farmers' organizations were either entirely absent or poorly developed, while dancing was not generally permitted on account of opposition from the churches. In many of these Tennessee and Missouri communities, the writer found the young people complaining that "things were dead," and church and Sunday school were really among their chief recreations. In some communities the young people went to prayer-meeting just because they wanted something to do. The influence of the country church would therefore seem to vary inversely with the facilities for social intercourse outside of the church, and the importance of the social factor must be clearly recognized. At the same time the extent of the development of

facilities for social intercourse and recreation outside of the church may be regarded as an *index* of the church's influence rather than as a cause of its decline. Thus the absence of dancing in the small communities in Tennessee and Missouri is due to the disapproval of the church, and shows the power of the church fully as much as it explains the presence of the young people at church or prayer-meeting.

The most striking difference found in these five regions, and the factor that bears most directly upon the problem here considered, is the conception of religion prevailing in these different regions.

In Tennessee, where the interest in the church was most general, the conception of religion was distinctly "other-worldly." Salvation was thought of chiefly as an escape from a future hell of fire and brimstone, and the means of escape was the wonder-working power of the blood of the Lamb, dispensed through the church. Out of 16 ministers interviewed not more than 3 expressed their conception of the church's mission in terms of social service, while the minister of the only church in the community in which one of the chief schools in the county is located, a so-called college, stated very emphatically that it is useless to try to make the world better. In consequence of this magical conception of salvation, the main emphasis in this county was placed on correctness of belief and correctness of ceremonial. The president of the leading denominational college in western Tennessee expressed his absolute disapproval of any scheme of church federation, because he could not co-operate with any church which permitted baptism by any other form than immersion. The minister of the largest church in Gibson County, a man receiving a salary of \$1,800.00 a year, took a similar position. Another influential minister in the Presbyterian denomination in this county kept a man out of his church for a year because the man wanted to be baptized by immersion, and he held that this form of baptism was unscriptural and therefore wrong. These are not isolated instances, but they reflect the general belief in the church as a mediator of a magical salvation rather than a generator of spiritual energy. Not only, therefore, did the fear of punishment after death compel attendance at church, but there was also a fairly vigorous social compulsion. Several

times in the course of his investigation the writer heard the term "wicked" applied by one member of the community to one of his neighbors. In each case, upon inquiry, the wickedness proved to be not dishonesty or immorality, or general meanness. It lay rather in swearing, not going to church, and making slighting remarks about the church. It need hardly be said that sectarianism in this section is bitter and church federation is very remote. It should, of course, be distinctly understood that side by side with this "other-worldly" conception there exists also the social viewpoint. There are devoted men in this section who are doing their utmost in behalf of a broader and more practical Christianity. The heaven is also at work in the hearts of most men, but as yet the social viewpoint is dominated and overtopped by the "other-worldly" viewpoint, like an under-story of maple or beech by an old pine forest. This "other-worldly" emphasis is characteristic of this section. It may be suggested, moreover, that the absentee-minister-once-a-month-preaching system, characteristic of the country-church work in this section, lends itself admirably to the "other-worldly" message. Under such a system, fire insurance is secured at very low rates, with a minimum expenditure of both time and money.

In Missouri, where the church influence was also general, the "other-worldly" conception was likewise prevalent; only 5 out of 18 ministers interviewed defined their views in terms of service to the community. The common idea was that of saving individual souls from the wrath to come, although the beginning of another attitude was evidenced by the applause which greeted speakers who presented the socialized conception of religion. Church federation in this section is still a dream. Two-thirds of the ministers interviewed were not in favor of it and were strongly sectarian in point of view. It is only fair to state, however, that between certain branches of the same denomination, as between the Presbyterians North and South, and the Presbyterians and Cumberland Presbyterians, some important forward steps have been taken.

Kansas may be considered as in the transition stage. Religiously the people of Kansas are probably less radical than they

have been politically. Out of 11 ministers working in the 6 communities here considered, 6 did not have the socialized viewpoint. Inasmuch as these 6 communities were studied because there was in them a definite religious movement for community betterment, the proportion of ministers in the state as a whole who did not have the socialized viewpoint would be larger. There is in Kansas a strong movement for church federation, but it has as yet accomplished little that is tangible, and it is meeting with many obstacles. For instance, one of the district superintendents of the Methodist church openly took the position that his job was to put the Methodist church on the map, and that this talk about church federation and the kingdom of God on earth was "all bosh." Other church leaders, while less outspoken, are no less unsympathetic.

In Westchester County, New York, and in Maine, 12 out of 14 ministers interviewed defined the mission of the church in terms of community service and expressed themselves as heartily in sympathy with the movement for church federation. Among the people, also, the socialized conception of religion is general. "A minister either has to lead or follow in this community-service program," said one of the ministers interviewed, and he was probably right. It is also to be noted that the preparation of the ministers in this section is generally good. Out of 15 ministers interviewed all had had some college or seminary training, and 7 were graduates of both college and seminary. It should also be noted that in 4 of these 6 communities, there was, and had been for years, a strong Universalist influence.

Confirmation of the conclusion that the removal of the fear compulsion is the most important factor in the decline of interest in the church may be found in the fact that in the districts surveyed the Catholic church, which is the most pronounced exponent of "other-worldly" Christianity, still commands the attendance and the financial support of its people. Thus, in one New York community, out of 109 Protestant families, 68, or 63 per cent, contributed no money to the support of the church, while of the 29 Catholic families 22, or 76 per cent, supported their church both by their attendance and by their money. It is worth noting that 6 of the 7 Catholic families who failed to support or attend their

church were Italians, and that out of 23 Irish Catholic families only one was not active in the church.

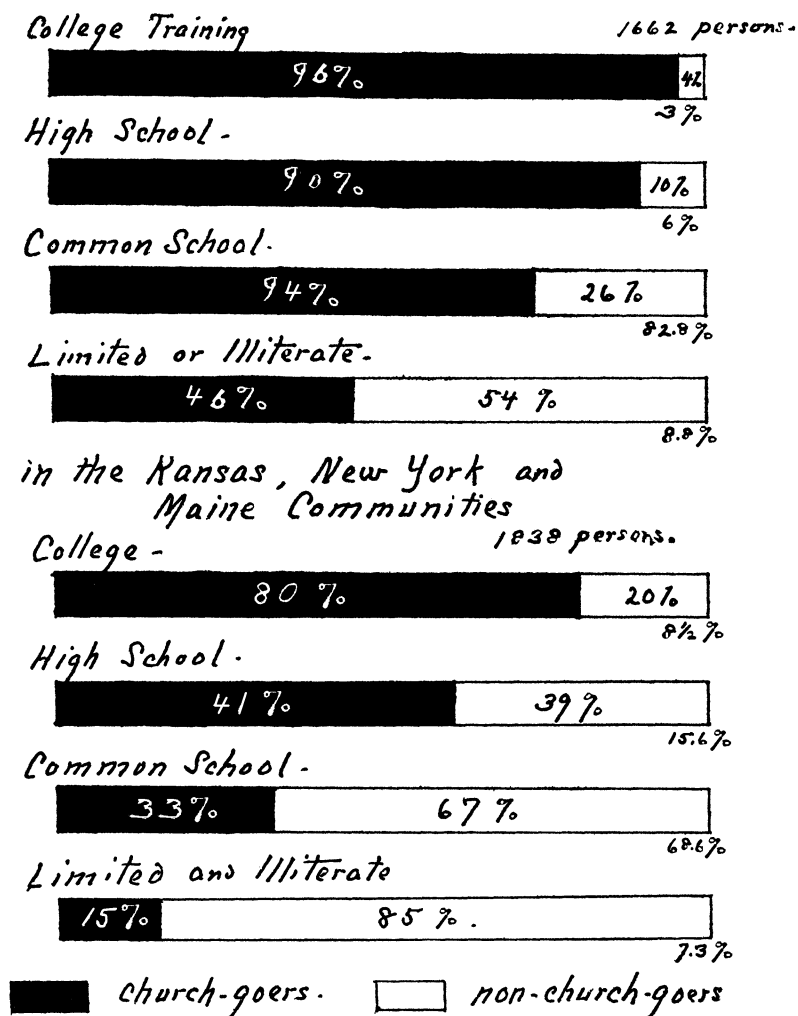


FIG. 3.—Church attendance of persons with different degrees of school training

If we now examine the church attendance of persons with different degrees of school training, as shown in Fig. 3, we gain further light on the problem. Comparing Kansas, New York,

and Maine, where the church attendance is restricted, with Tennessee and Missouri, where nearly everybody attends, we find that the great falling off has been among those with little school training. In all sections studied, the majority of those with more than common-school training are supporters of the church. This would indicate that in those sections where public opinion has become liberalized, and the old fear compulsion has become ineffective, the appeal to the nobler motives which has always existed side by side with the appeal to fear still retains its power, and the appeal meets with a better response among the better-educated classes. The fact that it is generally the better-educated who are called upon to bear the burden of the church work makes the church's appeal to them distinctly an appeal to serve and to assume responsibility.

It is worth noting in connection with the indifference toward the church among the poorly educated classes that in relatively few cases, according to the writer's observation, is conscious skepticism the cause of non-church-going. The majority of the men who do not go to church cannot give any clearly defined reason for not going. They believe that the church is a good thing. They like to see their children go. The reason is generally indifference and disinclination, coupled often with moral laxity. With the liberalizing of the popular religious opinions which are breathed in from the surrounding atmosphere, the old fear of hell becomes less vivid, and the old belief in the efficacy of going to church is challenged by the assertion "I'm as good as Smith and he goes to church." In so far as such men, even in the more liberalized sections, could express their religious views, these views would be those of the older theology. The religious atmosphere has merely made the hell in which they still believe less real, and has brought forward no other compelling appeal.

Undoubtedly social discrimination and the greater effort put forth by minister and people to win the better-educated persons have something to do with their good attendance. Thus we find in Fig. 4 that the farmers who own and operate their own farms attend church more regularly than the tenants, and the tenants attend more frequently than the hired men. Probably

the more well-to-do, like the better-educated man, is made more welcome when he comes, and is more likely to be given office and responsibility. At the same time we must also recognize an important factor in the character of the average tenant and the average hired man, and their relative unresponsiveness to the church's appeal.

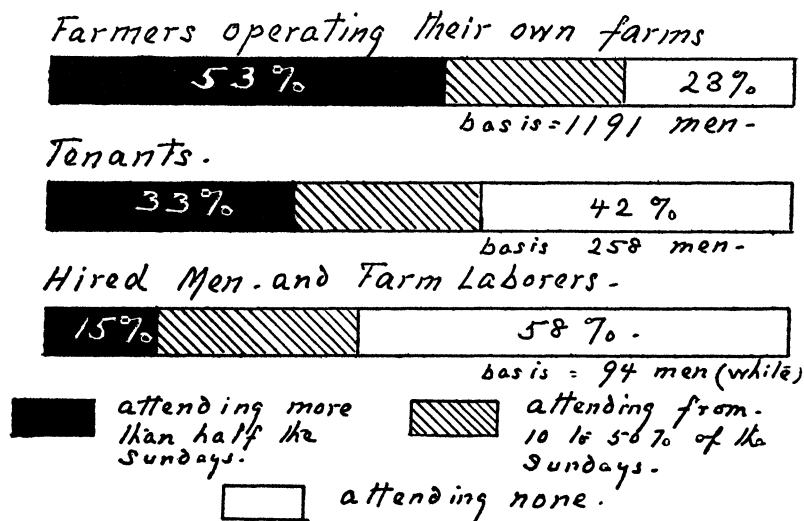


FIG. 4.—Church attendance of farm-owners, tenants, and hired men—based on the figures from Tennessee, Missouri, Kansas, and New York.

Confirmation of the view that the unresponsiveness of the average man to the appeal to his unselfish motives is the chief cause of the decline of the church's influence in the more liberalized sections may be found in the study of the church attendance of the men listed as active in public affairs, as given in Table II.

This shows that out of 178 men so listed in 6 communities in Kansas, New York, and Maine, 129, or 73 per cent, were also interested in the church and attended at least part of the time. This indicates that the country church is retaining its hold upon the more public-spirited and altruistic men of the community. The motives of these men may, in some cases, be mixed. They may be actuated by a desire for social recognition, or by the desire to

increase their influence; but it is fair to assume that the dominating motive which actuates these men in their activity in both church and community is that of service. It is also legitimate to point out that the church, in so far as it is able to influence the thinking

TABLE II
CHURCH ATTENDANCE OF MEN ACTIVE IN COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

	Active in Church	Not Active in Church
Wabaunsee, Kan.	20	6
North Salem, N.Y.	17	2
Bedford, N.Y.	16	5
North Anson, Me.	21	10
Newport, Me.	27	12
Dead River, Me.	20	12
New Vineyard, Me.	8	2
	129 (73%)	49 (27%)

of the community leaders, still possesses a power to control public opinion which is second only to that of the press.

The importance of the church as compared with other organizations is shown by a study of the social activities of the men of these same communities, as given in Table III. It thus appears that

TABLE III
SOCIAL ACTIVITIES OF MEN

	Active in Church Alone	Active in Church and Other Organizations	Active in Other Organizations but Not in Church	Active in Nothing
Wabaunsee, Kan.	22	31	26	35
North Salem, N.Y.	35	20	4	107
Bedford, N.Y.	25	30	10	85
North Anson, Me.	35	28	47	122
Newport, Me.	24	49	66	180
Dead River, Me.	7	12	14	52
New Vineyard, Me.	14	20	10	70
	162 (14%)	190 (16%)	177 (15%)	651 (55%)

more than half the men active in the church are also active in other organizations, and more than half of those active in other organizations are also active in the church; while of those who are not

active in the church, only 21 per cent are active in the lodge or other organizations. We may say, therefore, that no other institution or organization has taken the place of the church. Here and there country communities may be found in which lodges or farmers' organizations have become very strong and influential, but generally it is found that the leading workers in these organizations are also active in the church. The men upon whom the church has lost its hold are now, for the most part, outside of any organized social activity. They are no longer interested in anything except their own families, their own work, and their own pleasures.

The data upon which these conclusions are based are, of course, not sufficiently comprehensive to make them absolutely convincing. They indicate, however, that all due allowance being made for the other factors which enter into the problem, the main cause for the restricted interest in the church in Maine, New York, and Kansas, as compared with the more general interest in Tennessee and Missouri, lies in the removal of the fear compulsion due to the liberalizing of public opinion. We may go further and say that, in the five sections studied, the proportion of those who have lost interest in the church varies directly with the liberalizing of popular religious opinion; and in the process of liberalizing popular opinion the efficiency of the schools and even of the churches themselves has worked, at least temporarily, to the church's disadvantage. It is, however, a significant and hopeful fact that even in the more liberalized sections the better-educated and the more public-spirited are still, for the most part, interested in the church, and the chief losses are among those in whom the altruistic and social interests are poorly developed.

It is not within the scope of this study to compare the interest in the church today with that of a former period. All the evidence available, however, indicates that the church in New England has had commanding influence; and sixty years ago there was probably as small a proportion of non-churchgoers in New England as there is today in the country districts of Tennessee. The evidence at hand also indicates that in spite of the spread of Unitarianism and Universalism, the theology of Jonathan Edwards at that time still dominated popular thought. It may be inferred, therefore,

that the same factor which accounts chiefly for the sectional differences in church attendance would also account for the periodic differences.

These findings point to the importance of the church's task in saving or socializing the individual man, and they raise the question whether the modern gospel has not a message which will command the allegiance of the average man as did the old message of eternal punishment and the vicarious atonement. Cannot the hell of wrong habit, of diseased will, of misused opportunity, and of guilty conscience be made just as real and just as vivid as the hell pictured by Jonathan Edwards; and cannot the necessity of membership in, and loyalty to, the organization in which men are associated at their highest level, in order to guarantee the survival of the values which they desire in their personal life and in their social order, be made just as convincing as the old doctrine of salvation through the taking out of life insurance in the church—by accepting a creed, attending worship, and partaking of the sacraments?